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Ron Tanner

Red Shoes

By the time I got through the forest, the revolution was over and the President, his wife, and his lieutenant were swinging by their necks from the lion-faced gargoyles of the cathedral. The people stoned the corpses, which looked like gargoyles themselves, hardly human. I recalled seeing something like it in an old newsreel: Mussolini, dead and bloated, hanging upside down from the balcony of his apartment and wearing only a T-shirt and trousers, his people throwing stones. So much hate.

From where I was standing, I could not see much. Not that I wanted to. Three pendulums swaying slowly from high up the cathedral, the endless tolling of bells. The ocean roar of people. It did not seem real, any of it, the end of war, the end of tyranny. What did I know of our dead president—The Man, he called himself—except that the money he printed was no good (I used it to paper my children's tattered books) and that his promises were as empty as the shells of gutted television sets that now lined the Avenue of the Beloved Saints. But, oh, how The Man could stir our passions when he spoke! And he had a triumphant smile; he seemed to know so much more than we knew.

When the fighting grew intense and the capital was besieged, I knew I would have to join the Revolutionary Militia. It was for me literally a matter of life or death. The RM would have found me in my shop, cobbling computers from scavenged parts—business was quite good, really, until the siege—and they would have charged me with indifferent collaboration. "Doing nothing is doing something" was one of the RM's slogans.

Frankly, I was happy to leave my fourteen children. Living with them was like living with barely-tamed animals. In jest, Sofi and I often vowed never to touch one another again. "Look what becomes of love," I would say, gesturing to the children. Everywhere there were children. Children pulling pages from our precious books, children picking plaster from our apartment walls, children gouging our dining table with

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their breakfast spoons, children peeling tiles from our kitchen floor, children wrenching knobs from our doors and faucet handles from our sink, children unscrewing bulbs from lights and, inevitably, dropping them: bombs of delicate glass. It was all Sofi and I could do to feed them and, at the same time, keep our business going.

Because of migraines, terrible hatchet-bladed pain hammering at my eyes, the RM made me a dispatcher. I wore a pot for a helmet, we were so desperate for supplies. I carried a colonial-era musket that took four minutes thirty-three seconds to load and I had to be careful of the barrel overheating, maybe the chamber exploding in my face. That had happened to another dispatcher, who lost an eye and half his nose.

When word of our victory came, I was crouched naked in a plastic tub, ankle-deep in Malathion, trying to de-louse myself. There was no easy return to the capital, since all of the roads were mined. As we made our way through the forest, we heard the pop-pop of mines exploding in the distance, each one marking certain death or maiming.

Pushing through the crowds in the capital was as difficult as pushing through the forest thickets. I was angry at their obstruction, the way the oblivious mob clotted the streets and alleys—I had to get home. I had been away for nearly two years and I feared that, in the last months of fighting, Sofi and the children had been forced to join the RM. Or worse. Though I believe in no God, I had prayed every night for a dreamless sleep.

RM soldiers were giving out gifts to everyone who had helped in the fighting. "Don't you want your gift?" someone was shouting at me. I was struggling to walk in the opposite direction but the crowd was nearly impassable. The stranger, a captain with log-thick arms, grabbed me by my coat-shoulder and turned me around. "You deserve a gift—get in line, my friend." Son of a bitch, I was tempted to butt him with my musket. But he had a new automatic slung from his shoulder and another in his belt.

While we waited in line, the defeated soldiers of the Presidential Militia served us bowls of cold rice and chocolate kisses. With edgy enthusiasm, they repeated, "The Man is dead!" We nodded in return and said, "He sure is!" The chocolate made me giddy. When the guns went off, I fired mine too. My ears were ringing. I thought I might faint. Then, at last, I was at the palace doors, where the RM soldiers

were distributing booty. But all they had left were shoes, heaps of ladies' shoes—hundreds, perhaps thousands, of them—which had belonged to the President's wife.

I got a pair of red satin slippers with leather soles and red silk laces. The laces had once been adorned with gold tassels. The tassels I did not know about until I was walking away and someone said, "Those used to have gold tassels, right here, I seen them on TV."

"These?" I said. "Really?"

"You been cheated, friend. Where's the gold?"

I shrugged.

He offered a bitter smile: "You said it, friend. There ain't no gold."

Something is better than nothing, I was tempted to tell him but it occurred to me that this might have been another RM slogan and not a thought I would have voiced myself.

I rushed away and was relieved when the crowds thinned. I was never alone, however, because people were living in the streets. Many had set up house in abandoned trams and automobiles. Some were constructing lean-tos of desktops and room-dividers from office buildings. In many parts, the capital was still smoldering and it was not unusual to come upon a body now and then. My great fear was that I would see someone I knew sprawled in the rubble, even one of my own children. I saw a dog sniffing at a body, maybe a young woman, near the ruined library and I raised my musket to scare him off but when I pulled the trigger, nothing happened. I had forgotten to reload.

As soon as I entered my own street, I heard loud-speakered music booming from a rooftop nearby. It sounded like "Fly Me to the Moon." The street itself was bathed in pools of lovely white-blue light, which spilled from three half-ruined big-screen TVs, their pictures scrambled with snowy static. It was a good sign, I thought, that there was electricity. The buildings had a fairy-tale appearance, their fractured roofs looking crenelated, like ancient castles, their windows gouged open in fanciful patterns. In a clearing on the asphalt, amid the heaps of rubble, several couples were ballroom dancing, a few of them haltingly, probably drunk. The women needed more partners, I could see immediately, and a few beckoned me. There were Masha, Niki, Ludi, Seraf. They hardly recognized me. Had I changed so much?

"You're so thin!" they said, patting me on the back, pinching my bony cheeks. They looked none too good themselves, dough-faced, sunken-eyed. But under their scrutiny I felt terribly self-conscious, ugly and ill, like a terminal cancer patient released for his last visit home.

"My wife?" I croaked, fighting back the tears. "My children?"

"Fine! Down there. Go! Look. Fine!" They waved me on and I was not two steps away when they commenced dancing again.

There was nothing left of our apartment, but the children were still breaking and picking at what they could. Sofi had put them to work gathering brick, lathe, and plaster. When she saw me, she brought herself up, arms folded over her chest, and said, "Where have *you* been?" as if I had simply missed dinner. She looked the same, a little thicker, her eyes red from lack of sleep, her lips chapped and bitten from worry. She wore a man's pin-striped pants suit and blue rubber Wellingtons. The children nearly carried me to her in a swarm, kissing my knees, my hands, my elbows, my ears. "Poppi!" they cried.

"Miraculous that you're in one piece," Sofi said, examining my hands, kissing my blackened fingers. I thought of the men and women who would return home in aluminum boxes, some no larger than a roasting pan.

Only one child was missing: Lofe, our eldest. He had joined the RM shortly after I had. "Time for him to come back," I said.

"He wants a career," Sofi said.

"There's no career in the RM," I said.

"He's a sergeant," she said.

"He's sixteen years old!"

"Still," she said, "they needed men."

"Boys, you mean."

She shrugged, pretending that it couldn't be helped, though I could tell it pained her greatly, the way her eyes skidded to the ruined building-tops, to the darkened sky.

"If we act fast," she said, brightening, "we could loot some buildings, maybe get enough processors for six months' work."

The children hurrahed at this. "Loot, loot, loot!" they crowed.

"We'll all be killed," I said.

"One way or another," Sofi said.

"Let's sell these shoes." I held them over the children's heads. They jumped for them; they would have torn them to shreds in minutes.

"Where are the gold tassels?" Sofi asked, examining one with a surprisingly expert touch.

"Did you see them on TV?" I asked.

"When do I have time to watch TV?"

"The gold tassels are gone," I said.

"Did you sell them?"

"Loot, loot, loot!" the children chanted.

"How can I sell what I don't have?"

Sofi handed back the shoe. "These aren't worth half a week's groceries."

"They're silk," I said.

"Satin," she corrected.

"Loot, loot, loot!" the children sang.

"The RM intermediary government says we'll have work in the new automobile plant."

"Promises," she said. "What do we live on until then?"

"What *have* you been living on?" I asked.

"You don't want to know."

Mice, crickets, roaches, earthworms.

Whatever it was, it tasted good to me. I ate two hubcaps of the stuff, Sofi ladling it out with one of the ladies' shoes. The other shoe she used as a mitt to hold the pot, the only one she had not surrendered to the ammunition drive.

"You'll ruin them like that," I said.

She eyed me with mock disdain.

I was thinking that some sloughed-off skin cells of the President's wife resided in that shoe Sofi was using as a ladle and now I was going to eat them. This was not what the RM meant when it said, "War makes cannibals of us all."

When it was time for bed, we gathered around the small fire of my last book, a collection of monksongs, which the family had saved for my return. It made an intense, blue-flamed heat. We held our open hands to it as if begging for a tram token. At the children's request, I told a story: about a returning soldier who ate from the shoe of the dead president's wife; some of her sloughed-off skin cells in the shoe

clung to his food; after eating them, he felt better than he had a right to feel. In fact, he felt like buying everything he could buy, clothes mostly, but also silver pots and brass-bottomed pans and marble beads and pickled peacock feet. He grew so terribly extravagant that he exceeded the limits of his fourteen credit cards and was soon jailed for failure to pay his bills.

This made the children cry and complain, "Don't go to jail!" as if I had the power to stop such a thing.

"I'm not done!" I told them.

From his fourteen credit cards, which the police had thrown out the window of his house and into a neighbor's compost heap, sprang fourteen children ranging in ages from four to sixteen. His children lived on dirt, in fact loved to eat dirt, and so it was no trouble for them to eat the dirt below the city jail. Thus they freed their father. Then they ate a trough to the sea, which soon filled with water and became the longest river in the country. Then they all swam away to other countries, though they never stayed in one place for long because the children always ate it up.

My family applauded the end of my story and I was grateful because I knew it wasn't very good. I was out of practice, after all. As the children nodded off, huddled one against the other, backsides and thighs as pillows, Sofi and I eyed each other with longing. I heard the firecracker sound of distant gunfire, either celebrations or snipers, then more loudspeakered music, this time from far off. Violins, it sounded like.

The next morning, on our way to loot a highrise made of pink glass and black girders, we saw Lofe and two other young RM officers hanging upside down from a hotel portico. At first I thought they were dead—I was about to tear out my thinning hair and wail in grief—but then I saw that they were simply exercising, hanging from the exposed pipes by the crook of their knees and swinging childishly, their automatic rifles gripped in both hands. They aimed at us when we approached, I in the lead.

"War's over, Lofe, time to come home," I said.

He lowered his rifle and grinned at me. "Pop," he said. "You look like hell."

"I feel better than that," I said. "It's good to see you."

Lofe had grown tall since I'd left, taller than I, it appeared. He had a downy brown mustache and his hair was enviably long. A pretty boy, I thought. His mother's looks, those long lashes, that fine complexion. I wanted to kiss him but this would have embarrassed him, I knew. His uniform needed cleaning, wrinkled, a jam stain on the right shoulder as large as an ashtray.

"I'm on patrol," he said. "Can't budge."

"What's there to patrol?" I said.

"Have to watch for looters," he said. "These are desperate times." He aimed his rifle at an imaginary target in the distance. A pedestrian across the street shouted, "Don't you *dare* shoot me!"

Desperate Measures for Desperate Times was another RM slogan, this one invented to rationalize the induction of children into the infantry.

"You're looking at a family of looters," I said, at which the children began chanting, "Loot, loot, loot!" Sofi shushed them.

"An unfortunate turn of events," Lofe said. "I have to arrest you, do you know that?"

"You can't arrest us for something we haven't done yet," I said.

"Right," he said. He sounded relieved.

"Why don't you come down from there and follow us to a looting," I said. "Then you can arrest us in the act."

"Of course," he said. He got down. His comrades remained dangling. "I'll be back shortly," he told them.

In near-unison, they said, "Later, Lofe."

I felt bad that Lofe was so dimwitted but what can you expect of a boy who had been carrying a rifle around for two years? I could only imagine, and tried not to, the damage he had done to others and to himself.

"You think they'll have enough room in the prisons for all of us?" Sofi asked, goading him. I had heard that the prisons were overcrowded with enemies of the revolution.

"We'll make room," he said.

This was another RM slogan: We'll Make What We Need When We Need It.

"What did you get for fighting?" he asked me. "That silly musket?" I was still carrying the weapon, even though it wasn't loaded.

"These red slippers," I said, nodding to my swollen, slippered feet.

He gave them a cursory glance, then grinned at me. "See my gold tooth?"

"They gave you that?"

"Twenty-four karat," he said proudly.

The children were picking at Lofe's uniform. Already they had removed the silver piping from his shirt and the buttons of his pockets. I was gratified to see how gently he tried to swat them away. War has not ruined him, I told myself.

The children had already taken the laces of my slippers so that now they flapped at my soles. By the time we got to the highrise, they had stripped Lofe down to his T-shirt and trousers, each child with a ripped fragment of his once-glorious shirt. "You'll make a good father," Sofi told Lofe. He smiled mildly, pretending that it didn't matter. He had to hold his rifle over his head to keep the children from messing with it.

The highrise had been thoroughly looted already, we discovered. Nothing remained but a few mainframe shells and frayed network lines. We checked every floor, Lofe leading the way, his rifle ready. I must admit, I felt better with him in the lead.

Yield to the Young! Another RM slogan.

We looked into several other highrises but had no luck. The children paraded about with useless plastic scrap, clapping pieces together as they marched behind us along the avenue. When I glanced back to check on them I was startled to see that others had joined us—a procession of hopeful citizens, young and old.

Sofi said, "Apparently they think we know where we're going."

"I fear their disappointment when they realize we're going nowhere," I said.

"We're going somewhere," Lofe asserted. He was scouting the distance: a coil of smoke rising from a church steeple, disabled automobiles down the avenue, pedestrians waving as we approached, some onlookers tossing Styrofoam peanuts at us from office-tower windows, the white stuff raining down like confetti.

I envied Lofe for his youthful adamancy, his belief that we'd find something worth stealing in this picked-over city.

Some of those who joined our procession followed the children's

example and began clapping together plastic scrap they'd found along the way. The noise was tremendous, like the slap and drum of marching elephants. It was almost frightening. And, like a clamorous spell, it compelled yet more passersby to join us.

Every time we arrived at an abandoned building, our crowd would swarm into it, find nothing of note, then swarm out, bringing with it more recruits for the procession. We marched out of the city and late into the night, pausing to camp briefly in a field of ruined corn, which one of us inadvertently set afire, an orange-glowing spectacle we left at dawn.

At mid-day, Lofe admitted to me in a whisper: "I don't know where we're going." He sounded boyish now, frightened. He hadn't been vigilant about his rifle and the children had dismantled it: he carried only the skeleton of the thing, a butt and a barrel. I cautioned Sofi to check the children for ammunition; if we weren't careful they'd eat it.

It seemed that our three-kilometer rag-tag procession of citizens subsisted only on the noise they made as we marched. Their expectations sustained them. As we neared the coastal flats, a small single-prop plane flew low over us and wagged its wings as if in warning. Would it bomb us? I felt surprisingly protective of these strangers behind me, these gullible hopefuls. I shook my fist at the plane. Behind me I saw others following my example.

When we reached the sea, we found the flowers in bloom. "Don't eat those, they'll make you sick," I cautioned the children, but too late. They and the others denuded the coast of red poppies and yellow mustard blossoms. Even Sofi tried one. "Bitter," she said with a grimace, then she offered me one. I thought of the Land of the Lotus Eaters, how nice it would be if we could forget all we had been through.

After everyone had retched and spit up their flowers, we gathered at the shore and watched the water, which was as calm as a lake, hardly a ripple of wave-break. With the others—perhaps a thousand or more—behind me, waiting, I felt a tremendous pressure to offer some explanation for what had brought us here. My head was aching: the start of a migraine. Would we swim like lemmings to our death? I wondered.

The crowd was murmuring; several of my children, or maybe they were someone else's children, were still clapping their scrap, like an impatient audience.

It occurred to me that some gesture was necessary. So I slipped off

my red shoes, which were truly remarkable shoes, I decided, since the soles had not worn through despite our ninety kilometers of walking—my feet were terribly blistered and I wondered how I had escaped the pain—I slipped off the shoes, stepped into the shallows, and the crowd fell silent. Even the children ceased their racket. Gingerly I set the slippers on the water and, lo, they floated, like small red boats. I heard, behind me, everyone muttering their approval and relief, so I waded deeper, as if to exhort or somehow impel the shoes onward. We watched them drift away, side by side; at one point they nudged each other and I feared that they would sink abruptly but, small miracles, they stayed their course. I wanted to believe, I tried to believe, as the others did, that the shoes went on floating—and would float forever—because at that moment I lost sight of them, far out in the water, their toes pointed to the horizon, where sunset was pinking the cloudless sky.